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ABSTRACT

A survey of alternative school students was undertaken by the Minneapolis Public Schools in the Spring of 1971 to collect information which would help in the development of programs to meet the needs of these students. A total of 54 students, three-fourths of those attending three alternative schools, completed questionnaires. Compared with their previous (public) schools, alternative schools were viewed by the students as providing: more positive and closer relationships with staff and other students, courses that were more interesting and easier to understand, more student input and freedom, more relevant curriculum, and more opportunities to improve basic skills. Alternative school students appeared to have good self-concepts in general and positive concepts of themselves as learners; however, on items more directly related to school tasks they were not as positive. Implications of the study for the public school system are discussed. (Author/CK)

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Alternative Schools Outside the Public School
System in Minneapolis 1971:
A Description of Secondary School
Students Who Attended Them

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Ideas expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Minneapolis Public School Administration nor the Minneapolis School Board

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Minneapolis Public Schools

Alternative Schools Outside the Public School System in Minneapolis 1971: A Description of Secondary School Students Who Attended Them

Summary

What type of secondary students attend alternative schools in Minneapolis? Why did they leave their previous school? What qualities do they want in a school? What are their values and future plans? To answer these questions, the Minneapolis Public Schools conducted a survey of alternative school students in the Spring of 1971. It was believed that the survey information would help the public schools develop programs to meet the needs of these students.	see page 1
Fifty-four students, about three-fourths of the students who were attending three alternative schools in Minneapolis, completed questionnaires. The major objectives of the three schools were similar. Basic skills, positive interpersonal relationships, and an environment conducive to success rather than failure were emphasized.	2
Most of the students had previously attended public schools in Minneapolis (89%). School records indicated that many students had poor scholastic records and were probably deficient in basic skills.	2,4,5
Compared with their previous schools, alternative schools were viewed by the students as providing: more positive and closer relationships with staff and other students, courses that were more interesting and easier to understand, more student input and freedom, more relevant curriculum, and more opportunities to improve basic skills. Alternative school students stressed freedom, a comfortable atmosphere, and a more relevant education as reasons why they were attending alternative schools.	6-14
Alternative school students appeared to have good self-concepts in general and positive concepts of themselves as learners; however, on items more directly related to school tasks they were not as positive. The values expressed by alternative students as very important to them emphasized relationships with other people, rather than making money, being important, or contributing to knowledge. Forty-two percent of the students did not have any educational plans and only 6% had plans to attend college.	15-17
Implications of the study for the public school system are discussed.	19-21

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Minneapolis Public Schools

Alternative Schools Outside the Public School System in Minneapolis 1971: A Description of Secondary School Students Who Attended Them

In 1970 a number of community or free schools began appearing in the Twin City metropolitan area. These schools are now commonly referred to as alternative schools. These alternative schools developed from dissatisfaction with the public and private educational system on the part of some students, parents, and other members of the community.

This study sought to find out who attended alternative secondary schools. Why did they leave their previous school? What are their values? What do they want in a school? What are their future plans? The underlying purpose was to provide the Minneapolis Public Schools with information that might help them develop programs to meet the needs of these or similar students.

In the fall of 1970, plans were made to survey students attending alternative secondary schools. A questionnaire was developed for completion by alternative school students (copy in Appendix). Contact was established in March 1971 with four of the five known alternative schools in Minneapolis and with one school in Saint Paul. Fifty-four students in three Minneapolis schools completed the questionnaire. About 70 students attended these three schools regularly. Students at the fourth Minneapolis school, with a secondary enrollment of approximately 10 students, decided not to complete the questionnaire after an incident (unrelated to this survey) with a public education official that was viewed as harassing. The fifth alternative school in Minneapolis, which had about 20 students attending part-time in addition to enrollment in public schools, was not contacted.

One of the investigators visited with the students at the Saint Paul school on two occasions, but only 10 of about 40 students completed the questionnaire. The Saint Paul school appeared to have a different student population than the Minneapolis schools and its 10 questionnaires were not included in the study.

The Alternative Schools

Information regarding the objectives and program operations of the three alternative schools that participated in this study was obtained by discussions with the educational staff at the schools. Some of the major objectives of the three schools were similar. All three schools emphasized the learning of basic skills. In two of the schools, basic skills were stressed because they

were directly related to employability. In the third school, it was felt that basic skills are necessary if one is to understand what is going on; economic employability is secondary.

The three schools also emphasized group relations; how to get along with each other, response to group needs, etc. An attempt was being made to develop an atmosphere conducive to having success experiences rather than failures.

All schools were tuition free and were supported by local agencies and foundations. Attendance was desired but not required. Students were not excluded unless the school body decided the individual no longer "fit in."

Although students did not have to work on credits, most students in two of the schools were trying to earn credits toward high school graduation. Outreach workers from the Minneapolis Public Schools approved credits toward a public school diploma if the students met specified requirements. In the third school, a few students were interested in credits.

In talking with staff members at the alternative schools, it appeared that they were not bitter nor hostile toward the public school system. However, it was equally apparent that they believed the public schools were not doing the job for all students. One individual stated that although public schools were good for many kids, mass education cannot serve everyone and many students cannot receive the individual attention they need. A staff member in another alternative school felt that some students are "squeezed out the bottom" because the public schools serve the people who run society; however, he also felt that many individual teachers and programs are worthwhile.

The Students

The questionnaire completed by 54 of the alternative school students provided information regarding their previous public or private school, the last grade they attended, and the student's age at the time he completed the questionnaire (Table 1). Numbers do not always add to 54 since some respondents did not answer all the questions.

Eighty-nine percent of the students attended a Minneapolis public school prior to enrolling in the alternative school. Fifty-five percent last attended Minneapolis public senior high schools and 34% previously attended Minneapolis junior high schools. Only one student said he was in twelfth grade when he left his former school.

Table 1

Previous School, Grade, and Age of Alternative School Students

<u>Previous School</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Minneapolis Public Jr. High	16	34%
Minneapolis Public Sr. High	26	55
Minneapolis Private School	1	2
School Outside Minneapolis	4	9
Previous School Unknown	7	-
<u>Grade Last Attended</u>		
Seventh	1	2%
Eighth	7	14
Ninth	9	18
Tenth	12	24
Eleventh	21	41
Twelfth	1	2
<u>Age</u>		
Fourteen	5	10%
Fifteen	7	14
Sixteen	19	38
Seventeen	11	22
Eighteen	5	10
Nineteen	2	4
Twenty	1	2

The students' ages ranged from 14 to 20 years old. One-fourth of the students were under sixteen when they completed the questionnaire. Sixty percent of the students were 16 or 17 years old.

Most students (66%) found out about the alternative school from friends (Table 2). None of the students learned of the alternative school from their parents, although about 80% said their parents approved of their going to the school.

Table 2

How Students Discovered Alternative School and Parental Approval

Question	Response	N	%
How did you find out about the free school you are now attending?	Friends	34	66%
	Public-private school staff member	3	6
	Parents	0	0
	Adult from free school	3	6
	Other	11	22
Do your parents (or guardians) approve of your going to the free school?	Yes	41	79%
	No	1	2
	Don't say one way or the other	9	17
	Other	1	2
At present who are you living with?	Parents	41	79%
	Relatives	0	0
	Friends	6	12
	By myself	0	0
	Other	5	10

Previous School Data

In addition to the questionnaire information, cumulative records from their previous school were available for 32 (or 59%) of the students. These records were analyzed for scholastic grades and standardized test information. Most of these 32 students had poor academic records in their previous public or private school (Table 3).

About two-thirds of the students with the information on their cumulative records received D's or F's in ninth grade English and math. Most students were enrolled in ninth-grade general math rather than first-year algebra. About two-thirds of the students also had overall grade point averages in the D and F range in ninth grade and in high school.

Table 3

**Academic Record of Alternative Students
in Their Previous Public or Private School**

<u>Grade 9 English</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Grade 9 Math</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
A	1	3%	A	5	19%
B	2	7	B	1	4
C	8	28	C	3	12
D	12	41	D	7	27
F	6	21	F	10	38
No Data	3	-	No Data	6	0

<u>Grade 9 GPA</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>High School GPA</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
A	0	0%	A	1	5%
B	5	20	B	1	5
C	5	20	C	7	33
D	10	40	D	6	29
F	5	20	F	6	29
No Data	7	-	No Data	11	-

Results from standardized tests suggested that about half of the alternative school students were deficient in basic skills. Eighth grade Minneapolis-normed percentile scores on the Reading Comprehension subtest of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were available for 28 of the students. Thirteen of the 28 students were at the 35th percentile or below on this test. The remaining 15 scores ranged from the 41st to the 90th percentile, with only one student above the 67th percentile.

The alternative school students appeared to be somewhat below average on a measure of scholastic aptitude. The verbal-numerical score on the ninth grade Differential Aptitude Test was available for 26 students. The mean raw score for this group was 33, which places them at the 35th percentile on national norms.

Characteristics of School

The major section of the questionnaire listed 32 characteristics one might find in a secondary school. The alternative students first responded Yes or No as to whether or not each characteristic was present in their previous school. Next the students indicated whether or not each characteristic was present in their alternative school. Finally, they indicated whether or not they would like each characteristic to be present in their ideal school.

The 32 characteristics were subjectively grouped according to similar content and placed in the following eight categories.

1. Relationships-Belonging
2. Course Characteristics
3. Student Input and Freedom
4. Curriculum Relevance
5. Grading-Credits
6. Basic Skills
7. School Rules
8. Extra-Curricular Activities

From the results in Table 4 on pages 7-9, it appears that the alternative students had a very unfavorable opinion of their previous school and a very favorable opinion of their alternative school. In fact, one might consider the possibility that a negative halo toward their previous school influenced their response to many of the items. In any case, the students' opinions about their previous school and their alternative school were at opposite ends of the continuum: their previous school was "bad," their present school was "good."

Relationships-Belonging

Compared with their previous school, the students had more positive attitudes toward, and closer relationships with, the staff at the alternative schools (see Table 4). For example, 92% of the students said their alternative teachers showed an interest in them, compared with only 11% of the teachers at their previous school. Also, 98% of the students said they felt comfortable talking with the alternative school staff, 92% said there was little or no difference between students and teachers within the alternative school, and

Table 4

Alternative School Students' Perceptions of Characteristics of Their
Previous School, Their Alternative School, and Their Ideal School
(N=54)

Characteristic of School	Response	Previous School Percent	Alternative School Percent	Ideal School Percent
<u>Relationships-Belonging</u>				
Makes me feel that I am part of the school	Yes	0%	92%	83%
	No	100	8	2
	Don't Care	-	-	15
Has teachers that show an interest in me	Yes	11	92	79
	No	89	8	4
	Don't Care	-	-	17
Provides opportunities for close relationships with other students	Yes	12	96	80
	No	88	4	0
	Don't Care	-	-	20
Has a school staff that I feel comfortable talk- ing with	Yes	6	98	96
	No	94	2	4
	Don't Care	-	-	0
Provides opportunities to learn how to get along with others	Yes	14	80	72
	No	86	20	6
	Don't Care	-	-	22
A place where there is little or no difference between students and teachers	Yes	2	92	84
	No	98	8	6
	Don't Care	-	-	10
Provides opportunities to learn about myself	Yes	8	80	74
	No	92	20	9
	Don't Care	-	-	17
Has a school staff that is honest	Yes	4	86	91
	No	96	14	2
	Don't Care	-	-	6
<u>Course Characteristics</u>				
Offers work that I can understand	Yes	17%	96%	100%
	No	83	4	0
	Don't Care	-	-	0
Offers courses and teach- ers that stimulate me to think	Yes	13	87	84
	No	87	13	4
	Don't Care	-	-	12
Has teachers that make me do my best	Yes	31	51	49
	No	69	49	32
	Don't Care	-	-	19

Table 4 (continued)

Characteristic of School	Response	Previous School Percent	Alternative School Percent	Ideal School Percent
Has courses that are challenging	Yes	29%	78%	80%
	No	71	22	4
	Don't Care	-	-	16
Has courses that are interesting	Yes	20	94	96
	No	80	6	2
	Don't Care	-	-	2
<u>Student Input and Freedom</u>				
Makes me feel that I actually have some power in deciding how the school is run	Yes	2%	91%	87%
	No	98	9	2
	Don't Care	-	-	12
Gives me freedom to choose what to study	Yes	6	98	100
	No	94	2	0
	Don't Care	-	-	0
Gives me freedom to choose my teachers	Yes	4	83	78
	No	96	17	0
	Don't Care	-	-	22
Gives me full responsibility for how I want to spend my time	Yes	6	92	88
	No	94	8	4
	Don't Care	-	-	8
Allows me to work at my own speed	Yes	6	100	100
	No	94	0	0
	Don't Care	-	-	0
Allows me to attend class when I want to	Yes	11	65	65
	No	89	35	21
	Don't Care	-	-	15
A place that believes I should have full responsibility for what I want to do with my life	Yes	22	94	92
	No	78	6	4
	Don't Care	-	-	4
<u>Curriculum Relevance</u>				
Has courses that discuss the important social issues	Yes	20%	94%	78%
	No	80	6	0
	Don't Care	-	-	22

Table 4 (continued)

Characteristic of School	Response	Previous School Percent	Alternative School Percent	Ideal School Percent
Offers knowledge and skills that will be useful when I get out of school	Yes No Don't Care	36% 64 -	94% 6 -	98% 0 2
<u>Grading-Credits</u>				
A place where grades (A,B,C,D,F) are not emphasized	Yes No Don't Care	8% 92 -	92% 8 -	65% 14 22
A place where I do not have to earn credits for graduation	Yes No Don't Care	5 95 -	36 64 -	41 36 23
A place where it is easy to get credits	Yes No Don't Care	13 87 -	77 23 -	57 16 27
<u>Basic Skills</u>				
Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in English	Yes No Don't Care	60% 40 -	83% 17 -	67% 4 29
Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in math	Yes No Don't Care	53 47 -	96 4 -	75 4 21
Gives me help with my reading	Yes No Don't Care	25 75 -	90 10 -	78 2 20
<u>School Rules</u>				
Enforces the school rules	Yes No Don't Care	82% 18 -	35% 65 -	36% 36 28
Permits smoking in the school	Yes No Don't Care	2 98 -	100 0 -	90 2 8
Has teachers that make me toe the line	Yes No Don't Care	69 31 -	13 88 -	15 67 17
<u>Extra-curricular Activities</u>				
Provides opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities such as clubs and athletics	Yes No Don't Care	47% 53 -	84% 16 -	71% 0 29

86% felt the school staff was honest. Less than 10% of the students gave a positive response to these three characteristics when referring to their previous school.

Students indicated that alternative schools gave them more opportunities to learn about themselves and to form close relationships with other students.

For most of the 32 characteristics included in the questionnaire the ideal school response was similar to the alternative school response. The ideal school responses will be summarized in a later section.

Course Characteristics

Students rated courses at the alternative schools as more interesting, more challenging, more stimulating, and easier to understand than courses in their previous school. Students indicated that neither the alternative schools (51%) nor the previous schools (31%) had a high percentage of teachers who made students do their best. However, in their ideal school, only half of the students would like to have teachers who make them do their best.

Student Input and Freedom

Substantial differences occurred between alternative and previous schools on items in this category. Ninety-one percent of the students said their alternative school makes them feel they actually have some power in deciding how the school is run. Only 2% of the students said they felt they had some power in their previous school.

The students not only said they had more freedom in alternative schools to choose what to study, to choose their teachers, and to work at their own speed, but they also said alternative schools gave them responsibility for how they spend their time and what they want to do with their life. Students said these characteristics were not present in their previous schools.

Curriculum Relevance

A greater percentage of students indicated that their alternative school, compared with their previous school, had courses that discussed important social issues and that offered knowledge and skills that would be useful in later life.

Grading-Credits

Ninety-two percent of the responding students said that A, B, C, D, F grades are not emphasized in their alternative school. The alternative

school was seen as a much easier place to obtain credits than their previous school. The characteristic "A place where I do not have to earn credits for graduation" is confusing because it has two possible interpretations. The original intent was to determine whether or not the students felt they had to be working for credits in order to attend the school. However, the question may have been interpreted to mean "Do I have to earn credits in order to graduate from this school?"

Basic Skills

Although the previous schools received their most positive ratings on providing opportunity to improve skills in English (60% said Yes) and providing opportunity to improve skills in math (53% said Yes), alternative schools were rated at 83% Yes and 96% Yes on these two items. On the third item, 90% of the students said their alternative school gives them help with their reading, compared with 25% at the previous schools.

School Rules

Students said the school rules were more strictly enforced in their previous school than in the alternative schools. They also said teachers in the previous schools made them toe the line more than teachers in the alternative schools.

Extra-curricular Activities

Students indicated that their alternative school provided more opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities such as clubs and athletics than did their previous school.

Ideal School

As indicated by their responses to the 32 characteristics in Table 4, alternative school students viewed their ideal school similarly to their alternative school. Table 5 on page 12 shows that three-fourths or more of the students stressed the importance of positive relationships with students and staff members. They emphasized student input and freedom characteristics, although compared with the other freedom items, fewer students (65%) wanted their ideal school to allow them to attend class when they wanted to. Interesting courses, curriculum relevance, and opportunities to improve basic skills also were considered important.

Table 5

Some Characteristics of Alternative Students' Ideal School
(N=54)

Would You Like This Characteristic to Be Part of Your Ideal School?	Yes Percent
Makes me feel that I am part of the school	83%
Has teachers that show an interest in me	79
Provides opportunities for close relationships with other students	80
Has a school staff that I feel comfortable talking with	96
Provides opportunities to learn how to get along with others	72
A place where there is little or no difference between students and teachers	84
Provides opportunities to learn about myself	74
Has a school staff that is honest	91
Makes me feel that I actually have some power in deciding how the school is run	87
Gives me freedom to choose what to study	100
Gives me freedom to choose my teachers	78
Gives me full responsibility for how I want to spend my time	88
Allows me to work at my own speed	100
Allows me to attend class when I want to	65
Offers work that I can understand	100
Has courses that are interesting	96
Offers knowledge and skills that will be useful when I get out of school	98
Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in English	67
Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in math	75
Gives me help with my reading	78
Enforces the school rules	36
Has teachers that make me toe the line	15
Has teachers that make me do my best	49
A place where grades (A, B, C, D, F) are not emphasized	65

Reasons for Leaving Previous School

Why did the alternative school students leave their previous public or private school? On the questionnaire the alternative students were given a list of 14 possible reasons and asked to check as many as applied. Eighty-three percent of the students said they just lost interest, 77% said there were too many rules, 71% said there were too many required courses, and 69% said some faculty members gave them a hard time.

When asked to check the reason that best describes why they left their previous school, 15 students checked "I just lost interest; too boring", 6 students said they were asked to leave by the administration, 4 students said they were discriminated against, and another 4 students said there were too many rules (Table 6).

Table 6
Alternative School Students' Reasons for Leaving Previous School
N=54

	Yes		Best Describes
	N	%	N
The work was too hard	16	31	1
I had to get there too early in the morning	22	42	1
The work was not challenging	14	27	0
I felt left out by the other students	14	27	0
I was discriminated against	18	35	4
Too many rules	40	77	4
Too many required courses	37	71	2
I was asked to leave by the administration	21	40	6
I just lost interest; too boring	43	83	15
I was not allowed to take enough responsibility for my own life	23	44	3
The electives I wanted to study were not available	23	44	0
Some faculty members gave me a hard time	36	69	3
The courses would not be useful to me in later life	25	49	0
My parents wanted me to withdraw	2	4	0

Twelve students made write-in comments giving other reasons why they left their previous school. Four students felt they were being brainwashed to fit into a society they did not like, two students said they were not treated as individuals, and one student each gave the following reasons: school was like a prison, students had no control of their school, courses offered were not important, the school expected too much work, there was a gap between teachers and students, and there was too much free time.

Reasons for Attending Alternative Schools

Additional information on why students were attending alternative schools rather than public schools was obtained by asking the alternative students to state their reasons in their own words.

Many of the stated reasons were related to the concept of freedom.

- . Freedom to choose courses and to work at own speed (13 students)
- . Not pressured into doing things you don't want to do (8)
- . Too many rules (5)
- . Too many hassles about rules (3)
- . Public schools try to force your mind into something you don't want (3)
- . Students have input into how alternative school is run (4)

Other reasons indicated the presence of a more comfortable atmosphere in the alternative schools.

- . Good relations with students (4 students)
- . Can be friends with the staff (3)
- . Some friends were going there (2)
- . Can be honest with staff (1)
- . Feel comfortable (2)
- . Some kids in public schools thought they were better than others (2)

Some students said the alternative school provided a better and more relevant education.

- . More individual help (3 students)
- . Feel I can learn more (3)
- . Learn truth about the world (4)
- . Learn skills that will help me work in community (1)
- . Don't get bored (3)
- . Get attention in class (1)
- . Teachers explain things better (2)
- . More to do with preparing you for real life (1)
- . Learning increased by the way things are run (1)

Other miscellaneous reasons were:

- . I like it better (5)
- . Easier way to get credits (3)
- . I was kicked out of public school (2)
- . Parole officer said I had to be in school and no public school would let me in (1)

Self-Concept

The questionnaire completed by alternative students also contained a twelve-item self-concept scale. Six of the items appeared to be related to a general self-concept. The other six items seemed to measure an individual's concept of himself as a learner. Students responded to each of the 12 items by marking strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Responses are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

"Self-Concept" of Alternative School Students
(N=54)

Item	Strongly Agree Percent	Agree Percent	Disagree Percent	Strongly Disagree Percent
<u>"Self-Concept" as a Learner</u>				
I am not very good at school work	6%	28%	51%	15%
I am good at working with numbers	19	46	31	4
I feel I could learn as much as most people	32	62	6	0
I have some trouble with reading	9	40	30	21
I am as capable as the next person my age	38	57	6	0
I feel I am as smart as others my age	24	57	17	2
<u>General "Self-Concept"</u>				
I feel I am worth something as a person	63%	35%	2%	0%
I hold a positive attitude toward myself	30	49	21	0
I am afraid of making mistakes	4	25	45	26
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	25	58	17	0
I feel I have a number of good qualities	26	70	4	0
I feel that I do not have much to be proud of	0	15	42	43

Although it is difficult to interpret the meaning of the responses to the self-concept items without comparative data from other samples of students, it does appear that alternative students do not generally have negative attitudes towards themselves. Ninety-eight percent felt they were worth something as a person and 96% felt they had a number of good qualities.

On the items that seemed to measure "self-concept" as a learner, more than 80% of the alternative students said they were as capable, as smart, and could learn as much as other people their age. They were not so positive on the other three items that more directly measured tasks related to school curriculum. Thirty-four percent of the alternative students agreed that they were not very good at school work, 49% said they had some trouble at reading, and 35% disagreed with the statement that they were good at working with numbers.

Values

In an attempt to determine some goals and values alternative students have, they were asked to indicate how important each of twelve listed goals was to them. They also were asked to indicate which one of the twelve goals was the most important goal to them. The results in Table 8 show that alternative students placed the highest value on items measuring happiness in relation to other people. More than seventy percent of the students rated the following goals as very important to them: find happiness (93%), be able to get along with other people (85%), live my life my own way (84%), find someone to love and be loved by (72%), and have a happy family life (72%). On the other hand, less than one-fourth of the students rated the following goals as very important to them: make a lot of money (24%), be important (21%), and make a contribution to knowledge (21%). No provision was made for write-in comments.

The educational plans of alternative school students reflect these values. Forty-two percent of the students did not have educational plans, 30% wanted to complete high school, 22% wanted to attend a trade, technical, or business school, and 6% planned on attending college (Table 9).

Table 8

Values of Alternative School Students
(N=54)

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Most Important
Find Happiness	93%	7%	0%	17%
Be independent of others	42	32	26	1
Be important	21	45	34	0
Make a contribution to knowledge	21	55	25	0
Make a lot of money	24	35	41	2
Have a happy family life	72	26	2	2
Be able to get along with other people	85	13	2	1
Live my life my own way	74	26	0	9
Change the world for the better	61	33	6	7
Be of service to others	46	48	6	3
Find someone to love and be lived by	72	22	6	9
Find a satisfying job	57	33	9	1
No response	0	0	0	2

Table 9

Educational Plans of Alternative School Students
(Percent)
N=54

Complete high school	30%
Attend a trade, technical, or business school	22
Attend a college	6
Not to complete high school	0
Right now do not have any educational plans	42

Summary and Conclusions

Students attending three tuition-free alternative secondary schools in Minneapolis were surveyed in 1971 regarding their attitudes toward their previous school and their alternative school, their reasons for attending an alternative school, and their self-concept and values. Questionnaires were completed by 54 of the approximately 70 students who attended the three schools. Records from their previous public or private school were available for 32 of the 54 students.

The staff members at the alternative schools felt that the public school system was not meeting the needs of all students. Although the social philosophies of the three schools were different, the major objectives of the schools were quite similar. All three schools emphasized the learning of basic skills and the development of positive interpersonal relationships. Along with a flexible schedule to meet individual needs, attempts were made to create a situation conducive to having success experiences rather than failures.

The following summary statements regarding students who attended the three alternative schools in Minneapolis were based on the student questionnaires and records from their previously attended schools.

1. Most alternative school students were young (median age 16), lived at home (79%), and previously attended Minneapolis public schools (89%).
2. The majority of the alternative school students had poor scholastic records while enrolled in their previous schools. About 60% of the students had D or F grade averages. Many of the alternative students were deficient in basic skills.
3. Alternative students expressed favorable attitudes toward their alternative school and unfavorable attitudes toward their previous school. Compared with their previous schools, alternative schools were viewed as providing more positive and closer relationships with staff and other students, courses that were more interesting and easier to understand, more student input and freedom, more relevant curriculum, and more opportunities to improve basic skills.

4. Alternative students stressed freedom and a comfortable atmosphere as reasons why they were attending alternative schools. The two most frequently stated reasons for attending alternative schools were (a) freedom to choose courses and to work at your own speed, and (b) no pressure to do things you don't want to do. The most frequently given reasons for leaving their previous school were lack of interest and boredom. Other reasons given by a majority of the students were "too many rules" (77%), "too many required courses" (71%), and "some faculty members gave me a hard time" (69%).
5. Alternative students expressed good self-concepts in general and good "self-concepts" as learners. Ninety-six percent felt they had a number of good qualities and 80% said they were as capable as other people their age. On items more directly related to school tasks, the alternative students were not as positive. Thirty-four percent agreed that they were not very good at school work and 49% said they had some trouble reading.
6. The values expressed by alternative students as very important to them emphasized relationships with other people: finding happiness (93%), being able to get along with other people (85%), living my life my own way (74%), finding someone to love and be loved by (72%), and having a happy family life (72%). Not many students rated the following goals as very important: making a lot of money (24%), being important (21%), and making a contribution to knowledge (21%). The educational plans of alternative students reflected these values. Forty-two percent had no educational plans. Only 6% planned on going to college and 22% wanted to attend a trade, technical, or business school.

Discussion

Since the time this information was collected in the spring of 1971, more alternative schools have emerged. The phenomenon is not a local one. Public pressures for alternatives to traditional education are nationwide. Demands for new approaches to education with demonstrated productivity have come from

"cost-conscious" taxpayers on the one hand. On the other hand, demands for educational programs with greater flexibility, greater individual attention to personal dignity and freedom, and more emphasis on humanitarian and social goals have been stimulated by the civil rights movement and spread out to a large portion of the population.

Dr. Theodore Mitau, Chancellor of the Minnesota State College Board, has recently characterized the decade of the 70's as the decade of alternatives to education. Locally, we have read of the growing pressures in suburban schools for alternatives. Within the Minneapolis school district, attempts have been made to provide alternative education within a public school setting by the establishment of such programs as the Lincoln Learning Center, the Bryant YES Center, the Work Opportunity Center, the Basic Skills Centers, and more recently the extensive Southeast Alternatives Program. Parental and student response to the Southeast Alternatives Program, which permits students to select various approaches to their education, have indicated the demand for alternatives. There seems little reason to doubt that Mitau's pronouncement is accurate.

Three aspects of the current study of alternative approaches to education bear close scrutiny. First, there is little we have learned about the strengths and weaknesses within alternative schools and within public schools as perceived by alternative school students. Student responses to questions about characteristics of alternative and public schools tended to be polarized. Everything about the alternative schools was good. Everything about other schools was bad. By looking at the degree of polarization, however, one may be able to draw some suggestions for future study. It appears, for example, that alternative school students were relatively less dissatisfied with public school course content, such as English and math, extra-curricular offerings, and even the relevance of their public school education. On the other hand, extreme divergence was revealed on those characteristics related to freedom, time pressures, rules, and belongingness. In short, it appears that it is not so much what is being taught in the public schools as it is the operation of the school itself and the relationships of the students to the teachers, to other students, and to the school administrators.

This study does not report student-staff ratios in the alternative schools but they were much smaller than those typically found in public education.

The average school size for the alternative schools was about 20 to 25 students. Obviously, small schools such as these, typically smaller than the usual classroom in the public school, allow more attention to be devoted to the freedom, time, and humanitarian aspects of education. If large numbers of similar alternative schools are to be expanded by the public schools to meet the increasing demand for this type of education, the cost question must be approached. Separate facilities and additional staff, if the staff are to be paid at the same level as certified teachers, will be needed far beyond the capability of the public to pay. In similar fashion, it is unlikely that public schools can decrease their staff ratios to the same size ratios used in the alternative schools without taxing the public beyond reason. In short, it does not appear likely that the public schools can undertake the same kind of alternative education as undertaken by schools in this study. Ultimately, it seems clear that either the public schools will have to initiate alternative educational programs in a different form from those currently in operation in the community or that an entirely new funding system for such alternative schools or programs will be needed.

Before such widespread approaches take place, however, a third aspect must be carefully considered. At present, there is little that indicates whether or not the students benefit more from the alternative school environment than they do from the public school environment. The two strongest points in favor of the alternative schools at this time are simply the students' attitudes toward the alternative school and their lack of success in the traditional public school environment. Whether or not alternative approaches to education are more cost effective and beneficial to students than are traditional approaches is something which has not yet been revealed by evidence. On the basis of student and parent reactions it certainly appears that alternatives must be tried. However, to this date we do not have strong measures indicating the relative success or failure of such ventures.

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Appendix

Alternative School Student Questionnaire

Name _____

Number _____
(Do not fill in)

The information on the following pages is being gathered from students who are attending "community" or "free" schools. The information will be used to help determine changes that young people would like to see in the public schools.

All information given will be confidential. Only the person conducting the study will be able to identify you with your answers. Each student will be given a number which will be attached to his answer sheet. Then this first page with the name will be removed from the answer sheet so that no names will be on the answer sheet.

If you feel that putting your name on this first page will make it difficult for you to be honest, do not give your name. However, it would be useful to have your name in case we want to check with you at a later date. Thank you very much.

Minneapolis Public Schools
Research Division
Office of Research, Development
and Federal Programs
807 N. E. Broadway
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55413

February 1971

(1-4) _ _ _ _

The phrases below describe characteristics of a school setting. In Section A on the left, circle the number 1 for each phrase that accurately describes the last public (or private) school you attended. Then in Section B on the left, circle the number 1 for each phrase that accurately describes the free school you are attending now. Finally on the right in Section C, circle the number that describes whether you would like the characteristic to be part of your ideal school (ideal school means the "school" as you would make it or want it to be).

Section A		Section B		Characteristic of School	Section C - Would You Like This Characteristic to be Part of Your School?		
Describes My Last Public-Private School		Describes My Present Free School			Yes	Don't Care	No
5	1	6	1	Makes me feel that I am part of the school	7	1	2 3
8	1	9	1	Has teachers that show an interest in me	10	1	2 3
11	1	12	1	A place where grades (A,B,C,D,F) are not emphasized	13	1	2 3
14	1	15	1	Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in English	16	1	2 3
17	1	18	1	Gives me freedom to choose what to study	19	1	2 3
20	1	21	1	Offers work that I can understand	22	1	2 3
23	1	24	1	Makes me feel that I actually have some power in deciding how the school is run	25	1	2 3
26	1	27	1	Provides opportunities for close relationships with other students	28	1	2 3
29	1	30	1	Enforces the school rules	31	1	2 3
32	1	33	1	Gives me freedom to choose my teachers	34	1	2 3
35	1	36	1	Has a school staff that I feel comfortable talking with	37	1	2 3
38	1	39	1	Provides opportunity to learn or improve skills in math	40	1	2 3
41	1	42	1	Gives me full responsibility for how I want to spend my time	43	1	2 3
44	1	45	1	Offers courses and teachers that stimulate me to think	46	1	2 3
7	1	48	1	Allows me to work at my own speed	49	1	2 3

Section A		Section B		Characteristic of School	Section C - Would You Like This Characteristic to be Part of Your School?		
Describes My Last Public-Pri- vate School		Describes My Present Free School			Yes	Don't Care	No
50	1	51	1	Provides opportunities to learn how to get along with others	52	1	2 3
53	1	54	1	Permits smoking in the school	55	1	2 3
56	1	57	1	Has teachers that make me do my best	58	1	2 3
59	1	60	1	Has courses that discuss the impor- tant social issues	61	1	2 3
62	1	63	1	Gives me help with my reading	64	1	2 3

80 1 1-4 _ _ _ _

5	1	6	1	A place where there is little or no difference between students and teachers	7	1	2 3
8	1	9	1	Has teachers that make me toe the line	10	1	2 3
11	1	12	1	Allows me to attend class when I want to	13	1	2 3
14	1	15	1	Provides opportunities to learn about myself	16	1	2 3
17	1	18	1	Has courses that are challenging	19	1	2 3
20	1	21	1	Provides opportunities to parti- cipate in extra-curricular acti- vities such as clubs & athletics	22	1	2 3
23	1	24	1	A place where I do not have to earn credits for graduation	25	1	2 3
26	1	27	1	Offers knowledge and skills that will be useful when I get out of school	28	1	2 3
29	1	30	1	Has a school staff that is honest	31	1	2 3
32	1	33	1	Has courses that are interesting	34	1	2 3
35	1	36	1	A place where it is easy to get credits	37	1	2 3
38	1	39	1	A place that believes I should have full responsibility for what I want to do with my life	40	1	2 3

For each of the following statements, circle the number of the appropriate response from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
41 I feel I am worth something as a person	1	2	3	4
42 I am not very good at school work	1	2	3	4
43 I feel I am as smart as others my age	1	2	3	4
44 I hold a positive attitude toward myself	1	2	3	4
45 I am afraid of making mistakes	1	2	3	4
46 I am good at working with numbers	1	2	3	4
47 On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	1	2	3	4
48 I feel I have a number of good qualities	1	2	3	4
49 I am as capable as the next person my age	1	2	3	4
50 I have some trouble with reading	1	2	3	4
51 I feel I could learn as much as most people	1	2	3	4
52 I feel I do not have much to be proud of	1	2	3	4

For each of the following, circle the number of the response that indicates how important it is for you to have these things in your life. Then make another circle around the most important thing in your life.

	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not Important</u>
53 Find happiness	1	2	3
54 Be independent of others	1	2	3
55 Be important	1	2	3
56 Make a contribution to knowledge	1	2	3
57 Make a lot of money	1	2	3
58 Have a happy family life	1	2	3
59 Be able to get along with other people	1	2	3
60 Live my life my own way	1	2	3
61 Change the world for the better	1	2	3
62 Be of service to others	1	2	3
63 Find someone to love and to be loved by	1	2	3
64 Find a satisfying job	1	2	3

Remember to go back and circle the most important thing again.

5-6 _____ Leave blank

7-8 _____ Leave blank

9 Which one of the following statements best describes your educational plans:

- _____ 1. Complete high school
- _____ 2. Attend a trade, technical, or business school
- _____ 3. Attend a college
- _____ 4. Not to complete high school
- _____ 5. Right now I do not have any educational plans

Listed below are some reasons why students drop out of public or private schools. Check all the reasons that apply to you, add any others that you think are important, and then circle the one reason that best describes why you left the public-private schools.

- 10 _____ The work was too hard
- 11 _____ I had to get there too early in the morning
- 12 _____ The work was not challenging
- 13 _____ I felt left out by the other students
- 14 _____ I was discriminated against
- 15 _____ Too many rules
- 16 _____ Too many required courses
- 17 _____ I was asked to leave by the administration
- 18 _____ I just lost interest; too boring
- 19 _____ I was not allowed to take enough responsibility for my own life
- 20 _____ The electives I wanted to study were not available
- 21 _____ Some faculty members gave me a hard time
- 22 _____ The courses would not be useful to me in later life
- 23 _____ My parents wanted me to withdraw
- _____ Other _____
- _____ Other _____

Remember to go back and circle the one reason that best describes why you left the public-private school.

Just one more question about your opinions. Please select the one statement of each pair (and only one) which you more strongly believe to be the case as far as you're concerned. Be sure to select the one you actually believe to be more true rather than the one you think you should choose or the one you would like to be true.

In some instances you may discover that you believe both statements or neither one. In such cases, be sure to select the one you more strongly believe to be true.

This is a measure of personal belief; obviously there are no right or wrong answers. Just select the alternative which you personally believe to be more true (check one only for each question).

I MORE STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT:

- 24 ☐ 1. Without the right breaks one cannot be an effective leader.
☐ 2. Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities.
- 25 ☐ 1. I have often found that what is going to happen will happen.
☐ 2. Trusting to fate has never turned out as well for me as making a decision to take a definite course of action.
- 26 ☐ 1. In the case of the well prepared student there is rarely if ever such a thing as an unfair test.
☐ 2. Many times exam questions tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is really useless.
- 27 ☐ 1. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work; luck has little or nothing to do with it.
☐ 2. Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.
- 28 ☐ 1. When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
☐ 2. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow.
- 29 ☐ 1. In my case, getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck.
☐ 2. Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.
- 30 ☐ 1. Who gets to be the boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first.
☐ 2. Who gets to be boss depends on who has the skill and ability; luck has little or nothing to do with it.
- 31 ☐ 1. Without the right breaks, one cannot be an effective leader.
☐ 2. Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability; luck had little or nothing to do with it.
- 32 ☐ 1. Sometimes I can't understand how teachers arrive at the grades they give.
☐ 2. There is a direct connection between how hard I study and the grades I get.

- 33 _____ 1. Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.
 _____ 2. It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck play an important role in my life.
- 34 _____ 1. What happens to me is my own doing.
 _____ 2. Sometimes I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.
- 35 _____ 1. Knowing the right people is important in deciding whether a person will get ahead.
 _____ 2. People will get ahead in life if they have the goods and do a good job; knowing the right people has little to do with it.
- 36 _____ 1. Leadership positions tend to go to capable people who deserve being chosen.
 _____ 2. It's hard to know why some people get leadership positions and others don't; ability doesn't seem to be the important factor.
- 37 _____ 1. People who don't do well in life often work hard, but the breaks just don't come their way.
 _____ 2. Some people just don't use the breaks that come their way. If they don't do well, it's their own fault.
- 38 _____ 1. Most people can be trusted.
 _____ 2. You have to be very careful before trusting people.
- 39 _____ 1. Most people try to be helpful.
 _____ 2. Most people are just looking out for themselves.
- 40 _____ 1. Most people would take advantage of you if they had a chance.
 _____ 2. Most people try to be fair, even when they wouldn't have to be.
- 41-42 _____ Leave blank
- 43-44 _____ Leave blank
- 45-46 How old are you? _____ years
- 47 At the present time are you enrolled in a public or private school other than the "free" school?
 _____ 1. No, I have withdrawn from my previous public or private school.
 _____ 2. I attend part-time at a public or private school.
 _____ 3. I am still enrolled in a public or private school but I have stopped attending.
 _____ 4. Other _____
- 48-49 _____ Name the last public or private school you attended or are now attending.
 School _____

